

SOVIETS' "OTHER" FORCES

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When one hears about the Soviet armed forces, the usual topics seem to be their nuclear forces, their great armored capability, or their constantly improving aircraft. What is rarely discussed are those "other" forces that, although relatively few in number, may have just as great an effect in battle, if not greater. These "other" forces are those of the Soviet *desant* force--the air assault, airborne, and *Spetsnaz* units of the Soviet Army.

The *Spetsnaz* forces (or forces of *spetsialnoye naznachenie*, which means "special designation" or "special purpose") are also known by various other names--raiders, diversionary troops, and reconnaissance-sabotage troops. Although there are a number of other organizations within the Soviet Union, such as the KGB, that run "special operations," the term *Spetsnaz* refers only to those units that

come under the supervision of the Main Intelligence Directorate--*Glavnoe Razvedyvatelnoe Upravlenie*, or GRU.

The role of *Spetsnaz* units in war primarily includes:

- Assassinating military and political leaders (a mission also carried out by the KGB).
- Finding an opponent's nuclear facilities in order to designate them for destruction by aircraft or missiles or to destroy them outright.
- Neutralizing an opponent's command, control, and communications systems.

- Destroying high priority targets such as airfields, naval bases, and air defense systems.
- Disrupting the opponent's power sources such as power stations, oil and gas storage centers, pipelines, electrical power lines, and transformer stations.
- Preparing aircraft landing areas and drop zones within the opponent's rear area to help support airborne operations.

To accomplish these missions, the Soviet Union expects to have the following *Spetsnaz* units available for war:

- Forty-one independent companies, with one allocated to each combined arms and tank army. Each of these independent companies consists of a headquarters element, three parachute platoons, a communications platoon, and supporting sub-units. There are 115 men in each company, including 9 officers and 11 warrant officers. A company can operate as one unit or in as many as 15 sub-units (with flexible organizational structures). Its communications platoon is capable of maintaining communications with the 15 sub-units, if necessary, over a range of 1,000 kilometers.

- Sixteen *Spetsnaz* brigades, with one supporting each Soviet *front*. A *Spetsnaz* brigade is composed of a headquarters element, a headquarters company, three or four parachute battalions, and appropriate support elements. A *Spetsnaz* brigade has between 1,000 and 1,300 men and can operate as one unit or as 135 sub-units. Unlike other *Spetsnaz* units, the headquarters company has only professional soldiers in it and is maintained at the highest state of combat readiness. This company's sole mission is the assassination of enemy military and political leaders; it is thus the only regular *Spetsnaz* unit that will come in contact with *Spetsnaz* agents currently in the field.

- Four *Spetsnaz* naval brigades, with one allocated to each fleet. These brigades operate in much the same way as their counterparts at the *front* level, but there are some variations in their organization. These brigades consist of a headquarters element, a headquarters company (with the same mission as above), a group of midget submarines, two or three battalions of combat swimmers, one parachute battalion, and supporting units.

In addition, there are other, more specialized, *Spetsnaz* units. The estimated wartime strength of the Soviet *Spetsnaz* force, then, will be between 27,000 and 30,000 troops.

The employment of the *Spetsnaz* agents and units varies by designation. The intelligence-gathering agents of the *front* level intelligence units operate during peacetime to gain intelligence on some of the more sensitive installations within an opponent's area.

Thus, immediately before the start of hostilities, the personnel of the *Spetsnaz* brigade headquarters companies will begin infiltrating into an area to prepare for their specific missions. They will most likely enter through legal entry points with false papers.

Most of the *Spetsnaz* teams will be inserted using fixed-wing aircraft shortly after the initiation of hostilities. This will most likely be as part of the initial air operation con-

ducted by the Soviet air forces. They may also be inserted simultaneously on a mass scale and probably in conjunction with numerous other insertions of airborne and air assault forces.

The army level independent companies will be dropped from 100 to 500 kilometers behind the opponent's front lines, while the *front* level brigade units will go in 500 to 1,000 kilometers behind the lines. The naval brigades will concentrate their efforts against the opponent's naval bases, with priority going to submarines.

Upon landing, these units will establish operating bases normally several tens of kilometers away from their objectives. They will secure and camouflage all of their unneeded gear at the base, booby-trap the area around it, and leave a security force behind, while most of the team moves out to accomplish its missions.

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The second type of *desant* force that an opposing force can expect to see, should hostilities break out, are Soviet airborne units (*Vozdushno-Desantnye Voiska*, or VDV). The VDV, some 50,000 soldiers strong, is organized into eight divisions. (Of these eight divisions, four are specifically oriented on Europe, and a fifth is in central reserve at Tula.) Using only military transport assets, however, the Soviets can fully deploy only one airborne division, or the major combat elements of two divisions, within a combat radius of 1,000 nautical miles. With the assistance of 1,000 civil transport planes, the major combat elements of a third division could also be deployed.

More specifically, the military transport aviation force, with the specific mission of providing lift to airborne units, consists of approximately 1,700 aircraft. This force is made up of the older AN-12 Cub and AN-22 Cock transports, which are slowly being replaced by the newer and more efficient IL-76 Candids. To transport one airborne regiment equipped with BMDs—armored fighting vehicles—50 to 60 Candids or 90 to 115 Cubs would be required, with the AN-22 Cock being used primarily as a cargo hauler, much like the C-5 Galaxy.

Soviet airborne divisions are much heavier than the U.S. 82d Airborne Division in design and therefore have greater lift requirements. Each Soviet division has three BMD-equipped regiments (totaling 330 BMDs), an artillery regiment (equipped with 30 D-30 122mm howitzers and six M1975 122mm rocket launchers), an antitank battalion (equipped with 31 ASU-85 assault guns), and several other combat and combat service support elements.

These divisions can be used to accomplish strategic missions against deep targets, such as national capitals or other administrative-political centers, industrial or economic centers, or ports and airfields. Operational level missions might also include ports and airfields, along with headquarters and command posts, logistic facilities, communications facilities, key terrain points (such as mountain



passes, bridges, and water obstacle crossing points), and action to block or neutralize reserves. These operational level missions will be conducted in support of army or *front* operations, and normally at distances of up to 500 kilometers beyond the front lines.

Although some of the strategic missions might well be carried out by division-sized elements, the remainder of those missions and the vast majority of the operational level missions will be carried out by smaller units, from company to regiment. To employ these units effectively, the Soviets realize that they will need to depend upon achieving extreme surprise and upon conducting airborne operations under the cover of darkness or bad weather.

Finally, the airborne units will normally conduct their airdrops from an altitude of 150 to 300 meters, with the heavy equipment being dropped ahead of most of the soldiers. (They do not appear to use a system such as our low-altitude parachute extraction system.) The drop zones are normally 10 to 20 kilometers from the objective, and it is here that the appropriate sub-units of the drop force quickly organize before moving to their respective attack positions. The Soviets consider it essential that they reor-

ganize and clear a drop zone as soon as possible, because this phase of an operation is considered the second most vulnerable (with the air movement phase being the first).

The third group of units in the Soviet *desant* force are those that conduct air assault missions or, as the Soviets term it, missions involving "vertical maneuver." According to Major General Belov—the most widely publicized Soviet theoretician on helicopter warfare—"vertical maneuver" involves "military transport and army aviation airmobile troops which are organized into fundamentally new combined arms antitank and reconnaissance combined units and sections; and other air-transportable combined units and sections."

Although the employment of VDV and *Spetsnaz* forces also clearly fits into this definition, the term "vertical maneuver" refers mostly to the employment of those units that are organic to the *front* level and below. These units include the airmobile and newly formed air assault brigades organic to each *front*; the air assault battalion organic to each army; the air assault-trained motorized rifle battalion found in each motorized rifle regiment; and possibly a specially trained company in each division that is designed

to conduct commando-type missions at the tactical level.

There is little more to be said about the motorized rifle and commando units. These are not new units in the organization of the Soviet division, but are made up of normal motorized rifle troops who receive extra or special training to accomplish specific missions. Their existence gives a division commander a tactical air assault option. The missions for these units will normally be restricted to a depth of 20 kilometers into an opponent's rear area, and will include such assignments as securing the far side of major obstacles, moving rapidly into an area hit by a nuclear strike to secure it for the main body, conducting operations against command and control or logistic areas, and working with forward detachments to help speed their movement (by securing river crossing points and the like).

The army level air assault battalions have missions similar to those of their division counterparts; but because they have one company equipped with BMDs instead of BMPs (as are the motorized rifle battalions used by the divisions), they will be more effective on the ground once they have been inserted. This is due to the fact that the division level forces will not be able to take their BMPs and will thus have to fight a dismounted action on the objective. The army level air assault battalion will have a limited maneuver capability, however, since its BMD-equipped company will be able to take its BMDs. This leaves the army level commander with an air assault force composed of two dismounted companies and one mounted company, which can operate together or on separate missions.

The airmobile brigades, which have been in existence since the early 1970s, are made up of three dismounted rifle battalions and possibly a BMD-equipped battalion (although sources conflict on this latter point). Because of their "lightness," these brigades are not expected to be widely used on a European battlefield. If they should be, however, they could be effective in securing such objectives as mountain passes, government centers, and airfields. The employment of these brigades is expected to be at a depth of 20 to 100 kilometers into an opponent's rear area. Although manned by airborne-trained soldiers, these units will be inserted via helicopter, and are not expected to jump in.

The final "vertical maneuver" unit is the air assault brigade. Like the airmobile brigade, this unit gives a *front* level commander direct access to an air assault unit. Because it is structured with two BMD-equipped battalions, as well as two airborne rifle battalions, the air assault brigade does not have the apparent problem of "lightness" that the airmobile brigade has. Consequently, it will probably be used to depths of up to 300 kilometers.

Its list of possible missions includes all those already mentioned in the tactical or operational realm. Its most significant role, though, is the one it may play in support of an operational maneuver group (OMG). In fact, the air assault brigades may well be the forward detachments of the OMGs. Their operations would include the destruction of an opponent's nuclear weapons, command and control areas, and air defense sites. They would be effective for seizing the key terrain necessary for the OMGs to keep up their high rates of march—in particular, river crossing points. They could conduct economy-of-force and raiding missions ahead and in support of the OMGs. In short, the Soviets have seen an advantage in using an air assault brigade in this manner, and their training exercises indicate that they have every intention of doing so on the battlefield.

Although the *desant* forces of the Soviet Army may often be considered the "other" forces by Western analysts, it is apparent that they have a relatively high priority at home. The Soviets appear to have great plans for their *desant* troops on the next battlefield, and we would be unwise to give them less consideration than they are due. The success of *Spetsnaz*, airborne, and air assault forces can have a significant, if not devastating, effect on an opponent's forces. Therefore, it is to our advantage, if not vital to our survival, to be prepared for them before they come.

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